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ABSTRACT

To examine the potential role of teacher-student interactions in the teaching and learning of written language, a study analyzed the writing conference interaction between a teacher and four separate college students: one high achieving Caucasian, one high achieving Asian American, one low achieving Caucasian, and one low achieving Asian American. The Asian American students were native English speakers whose parents spoke an Asian language. Everything the students wrote was collected, including all drafts of their papers and all their notes, and all their conferences (a minimum of four across the semester) were tape recorded. Also collected were three investigator-student interviews about the student's at-home composing process. Transcripts were examined for topics of conversation and idea units. Findings indicated that (1) the different students wanted to focus on different types of topics (discourse level topics for the two Caucasians and surface level for the high achieving Asian American; the lowest achieving student had no hierarchy of intellectual topics); (2) the teacher focused on different types of intellectual topics for the different students (discourse level topics for all except the lowest achieving Asian American student); (3) the teacher gave more praise to the higher achieving students who seemed to elicit that praise by expressing their insecurity about their writing; (4) the lower achieving students initiated topics likely to alienate a teacher; and (5) the synchrony of the conversation broke down with the lowest achieving Asian American student, who inserted backchannel signals at inappropriate times in the conversation. (HOD)

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Teacher Student Interaction in the Writing Conference: Response and Teaching

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association
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CS 207 460

Teacher Student Interaction in the Writing Conference: Response and Teaching [1]

INTRODUCTION

Although children generally learn written language in school and acquire spoken language at home, they depend on response from others for both types of language learning. Most evidence dealing with spoken language acquisition supports the theory that children acquire spoken language through hypothesis testing--by "testing their hypotheses about structure and function and by finding out how well they are understood by others when doing this" (Clark & Clark, p. 337). Although it is probable that the processes of acquiring written and spoken language differ in significant respects, it is likely that the responses of the receivers or readers of written messages give learners a foundation for testing hypotheses about the construction of written communication. Just as parent-child interaction is central to the process of hypothesis testing when children acquire speech, teacher-student interaction becomes central when students learn to write in school. Our research focuses on a key teacher-student interactive event in the teaching and learning of written language: the writing conference. We examine its potential role in the teaching and learning of written language.

From elementary school through college, the student-teacher writing conference has become a popular and seemingly effective pedagogical event (e.g., Duke, 1975; Graves, 1982; Murray, 1968). The conference occurs away from classroom activity so that teacher and student can interact one-to-one. Both participants have the opportunity to express not only academi

but also personal concerns about any number of issues ranging from specific student papers to writing in general, and even spilling over into areas only tangentially related to writing. The conference gives the teacher a chance to address the student's individual needs in a way that cannot be duplicated in the classroom, and perhaps mainly for this reason, the conference has come to be regarded as a felicitous adjunct to classroom interaction, which often unavoidably demands that the teacher homogenize the student group being addressed.

In a sense, the conference is two things at once (Freedman and Katz, in press). First, unlike most learning situations, it is a conversational dialogue. As such, it has what Gumperz (1982) calls "dialogic properties"; that is, among other things, meanings and interpretations are being continuously "negotiated by speaker and hearer and judgements either confirmed or changed by the reactions they evoke." (p. 5) In other words, both participants continuously engage in seeking and maintaining a mutually agreeable level of interaction. Characterized by turn-taking, the conference-as-conversation also allows each participant to raise issues, to shift topics, and to encourage or discourage topic elaboration.

But like most school-based learning situations, the conference is also a teaching-learning event, constrained by the teacher-student relationship and the relative status of the one to the other, as well as by an overall purpose that the teacher give something, i.e., new knowledge, to the student.

This double-headed nature makes the conference particularly

interesting to study and raises questions about teaching and learning that our research has attempted to begin to answer. Do, for example, high and low achieving students and students from differing ethnic backgrounds elicit different types of responses from the teacher during the writing conference? Do students themselves respond differently according to ability or ethnic background, and can their responses be explained by the data? Can we develop hypotheses about the effects on learning of these writing conferences? Can we develop insight into the efficacy of individualized teacher-student interaction?

It has been recognized for some time that high and low achieving students and students from non-mainstream ethnic backgrounds receive differential instructional emphases, even within the same course, resulting in high ability, middle class students being given discourse strategies that can prepare them to participate in a literate, middle-class society (e.g., Collins and Michaels, 1980; Michaels, 1981). Low achieving students and students from non-Caucasian ethnic groups often have difficulty adapting to the culture of the school and may unintentionally elicit differential treatment from their teachers (e.g., Au and Mason, 1981; Cazden et al., 1972; Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz, 1981; Michaels, 1981). These students also have difficulty acquiring the written language of the school, and once such students begin to have difficulty, their problems only increase (e.g., Weinstein, 1982; Wilkinson, 1981).

It is reasonable to hypothesize that differential interactions may occur during the writing conference, and that such interactions, which can become central to the acquisition

process, may be at the root of the difficulties many students experience when learning to write. That the conference is a one-to-one setting may add to the problem, for here teacher response has at least the appearance of being spontaneous and personal behind its often somewhat planned (Ochs, 1979) and pedagogic nature.

For this paper, we examine student teacher interactions in one college-level writing conference for each of four students: one high achieving Caucasian, one high achieving Asian American, one low achieving Caucasian, and one low achieving Asian American. With this small sample, we cannot make general claims about written language acquisition; however, we aim to suggest possible avenues to explore and certain analytic methods to use to help us understand how best to study the acquisition process and in the end to help students in their efforts to acquire written language skill. We have chosen to focus on the first conference of the semester for each student. We look closely not only at differences in how these four students interact with the same teacher but also at how teacher and student initially establish the teaching/learning relationship.

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Subject Selection

Teacher

The teacher was selected from a pool of approximately 30 instructors at San Francisco State University (S.F.S.U.) who have participated in a rigorous three-course training sequence for

training college composition teachers. The 30 were hired because they excelled in the training program.

All these instructors require regular teacher-student writing conferences of their writing students. The teacher (T) was chosen because she represented the best teaching available. Student evaluations placed T in the top 90% of the staff, as did supervisor evaluations based on class visits. We were interested in seeing how an excellent teacher works with what we would traditionally label higher or lower achieving students and with students from differing ethnic groups.

Students

Originally eight students were chosen to participate in the study, two high achieving Caucasians, two low achieving Caucasians, two high achieving Asian-American, and two low achieving Asian-Americans. Those students designated as high achieving scored above 500 on verbal aptitude as measured by the SAT, and those designated as low achieving scored below 350. Deciding on the ethnic mix was the result of a demographic survey conducted in 1978 of students enrolled in composition courses at S.F.S.U. which showed an almost even mix of Caucasian-Americans (31%) and Asian-Americans (29%), a parameter that invited our studying the Asian-American student writer, about whom little work had yet been done.

The Asian-American students selected to participate were native English speakers whose parents spoke an Asian language; thus, they came from homes in which there was an Asian cultural heritage, but they were not expected to produce the writing

errors typical of the non-native speaker.

From these eight students, everything they wrote was collected, including all drafts of their papers and all their notes. All their conferences were tape recorded, a minimum of four across the semester for all students who completed the course.[2] Also collected were three investigator-student interviews about the student's at-home composing process.

Next, four students who learned most and who had the most successful T-S interactions in the conferences were selected to remain in the study, one from each original group: high and low achieving Caucasian and Asian-American. Selections were based on both student and teacher assessments. In this study, then, we look at these four students:

(1) JAY, high achieving Caucasian

(2) SHERRY, high achieving Asian-American

(3) DEE, low achieving Caucasian

(4) CEE, low achieving Asian-American

While the group is split in two by ability level, we note that the four students are also listed in order of decreasing scores on the SAT: Jay scored higher than Sherry; Dee scored higher than Cee.

Data Base

Since we wanted to learn about how the relationship between T and S is established, we studied the first of the semester conferences for each of the four students. It was reasonable to

believe that in this first conference differences and similarities in the students' interaction with T would begin to evolve. This conference had the added benefit of T's following the same specified format for each S. The conference covered, in sequence, discussion of (1) interview questions to S about course schedules, previous writing courses, and writing habits; and (2) certain diagnostic instruments that S had already completed, specifically, (a) the items on a questionnaire that had been given to the entire class about writing; (b) a writing sample done by the entire class; and (c) the items on a verbal skills test, also completed by the entire class.

Each conference, which was audiotaped and then transcribed, took from 30 to 45 minutes.

Data Analysis

Topics of Conversation

We first examined topics of conversation, a semantic concept (Keenan and Schieffelin, 1976; Covelli and Murray, 1980; Shuy, 1981). By analyzing what one teaches, that is, the topics one covers and the topics that concern students, one can see how (and if) conferences with different students vary while at the same time discovering systematically what the key topics in a conference are.

Two independent coders identified topic shifts and achieved agreement approximately 90% of the time. They noted whether T or S initiated a topic and whether T or S was continuing a topic. (For further discussion of procedures for analyzing topic shifts, see Freedman, 1981). For each student, the coders then noted how often each topic was T-initiated, S-initiated, T-continued, or S-

continued. Topics were labelled and classified as either intellectual, that is, dealing objectively with some aspect of the subject matters that came up, or affective, that is, dealing with either T or S feelings about different subjects (including feelings about each other), or other, that is, dealing with neither of the other classifications and generally unique to a particular student.

We followed Mehan's (1978, 1979) procedures for accounting for data:

(1) "Retrievability of data" (Mehan, p. 19): The data should not be presented in a reduced or tabulated form when one presents research findings; verbatim transcripts should be organized and included. In other words, the frequency counts of correlational research and the selected descriptions in the field report are not sufficient.

(2) "Comprehensive data treatment" (Mehan, p. 20): A model for data analysis must include all the data. "This comprehensive data analysis is accomplished by a method that is analogous to 'analytic induction' (Znanicki, 1934, 232-233; Robinson, 1951). The method begins with a small batch of data. A provisional analytic scheme is generated. The scheme is then compared to other data, and modifications are made in the scheme as necessary. The provisional analytic scheme is constantly confronted by 'negative' or 'discrepant' cases until the researcher has derived a small set of

recursive rules that incorporate all the data in the corpus" (Mehan, p. 21). This is similar to the procedure the linguist uses to explain the rules of speech, to show the organization inherent in spoken language (Chomsky, 1965).

(3) "Convergence between researchers' and participants' perspectives" (Mehan, p. 22): The researcher must check his or her interpretations of the events against the perceptions of the participants.[3]

(4) "Interactional level of analysis" (Mehan, p. 23): "Since classroom events [and conference events] are socially organized, a constitutive analysis has the further commitment to locate this organization in the interaction itself. . . . evidence for the organizational machinery of lessons [and conferences] is to be found in the words and in the gestures of the participants" (pp. 23-24). In other words, what the participants actually do and say, not what one guesses about their thoughts, is what will reveal the structure of the event.

Idea Units

To allow a closer examination of the discourse, we had certain segments of the transcripts transcribed into idea units. The theoretical basis for this division comes from Chafe (1980), who defines the idea unit as a segment of discourse that coincides with a person's focus of attention or focus of onsciousness. Chafe notes, "A property of spontaneous speech

that is readily apparent to anyone who examines it closely is that it is produced, not in a flowing stream, but in a series of brief spurts" (p. 13). These spurts are the idea units. The main criterion for deciding on an idea unit boundary is the intonational contour (that is, pitch either rises or falls).

By breaking certain topics into idea units (numbering each unit and placing it on a separate line), we could measure the amount of conscious energy or focus devoted to each part of the conference conversation, compare the weight of the teacher's and student's focus on particular topics, and compare the weights across conferences. We could then develop hypotheses about the consequences of topic focus on the student-teacher relationship, and try to think of that emerging relationship as it might affect subsequent student writing.

This analysis also allowed us to hypothesize whether the amount of focus could be related to student ability or ethnicity, a topic that could be pursued in more extensive research that would make use of a much larger S and T sample base.

Comparison of Cross-Conference Similarities: Backchannel Cues

We next looked at a segment of discourse that appeared to be the same across conferences, to see if, on close analysis, an apparently similar incident might provide insights to add to the analysis of differences in topic focus across conferences that we had already found and identified. We selected the segment in each conference when T and S discussed the test of verbal skills that S had taken in class, since T followed the same format and covered the same items in this segment for each S. Our close analysis consisted of examining "backchannel" cues (signals) made

by each S.

Backchannel signals are what Yngve (1970) calls interjections such as "O.K.," "right," "aha," and "uh huh," and are a common signal of conversational cooperation (Gumperz, 1982). Further, Gumperz explains that they are expected to be synchronous in conversation, coming at boundaries between clauses or tone groups (i.e., a noun phrase (NP) followed by a verb phrase (VP)). Rationale for analyzing these segments for backchannel signals comes from studies of interactive synchrony from which it has been shown that asynchrony characterizes "uncomfortable moments" in conversational interaction (e.g., Erickson and Schultz, 1982). As Gumperz notes, because the timing of backchannels can reflect differing socio-cultural conventions, it may unintentionally create, to use Erickson's phrase, "uncomfortable moments" in cross-cultural communication. Analysis of backchannels was, thus, a way to discuss "harmony" or "disharmony" between T and S, and to discover possible differences among the four students that might fall into a pattern.

Consequences to the Student

Since our semantic analysis uncovered differences in both T and S behavior, we next looked for what we could call obvious consequences of these differences for the student. That is, since the student presumably is to come away from a conference having been given at least something from the teacher, we looked for what the students indeed came away with in these first conferences which, occurring at the beginning of the semester,

did not focus on current class work or class assignments and so could not contribute in an immediate or direct way to the student's work for the course.

We found two points worth noting: (1) expository modeling episodes and (2) invitations to return to T's office, issued by T to S. As a way to measure the amount of "conscious energy" devoted to these segments of the conference, we counted the idea unit focus. For the modeling episodes, we also noted how frequently they occurred. These counts allowed us to compare conferences for patterns.

RESULTS

Analysis

Semantic

Generalizations About Self. When considering the semantic content of the data, we looked primarily for "focal" topics, those specific topics, both intellectual and affective, that T and S seemed to want to address most. In the analysis, however, we encountered an interesting sidelight: throughout the conferences, students offered different generalizations about themselves, not necessarily "focal" as we have defined the term, but nonetheless informative statements volunteered (that is, not made in response to T questions but emerging spontaneously) by S about S. That students made such generalizations is not in and of itself surprising--we all, during conversation, make them (I never liked pizza, I'm an Agatha Christie fan, I don't water-ski very well, and so on). What we noticed, though, was that these generalizations fell into distinctive patterns for each student.

Because of this they deserve attention, and we discuss them first since they are one factor, albeit a subtle one, that we think influences the general quality of the conferences, lending support to our findings on focal topics.

The generalizations made by each S were as follows:

1) Jay
. . . I could write long letters, but after I read it I can't stand them.
I really admire people who can write well.
People who write well are special to me.
I like to write well.

2) Sherry
I'm pretty weak in English.
I'm really not good in math.

3) Dee
I hate libraries.
I still don't think I'm that good a writer.
I'm not really into writing . . .
I never did well on tests.
I have a terrible vocabulary.

4) Cee
My sister has a brighter mind than I do.
I enjoy working better than going to school.
I prefer to be educated in a company because I learn much faster.
I do not like lectures at all.

Jay's generalizations are positive, revealing his sympathy with writing--"people who write well are special to me"--and would no doubt please an English teacher. Sherry's, while critical about herself, are nonetheless mitigated criticisms--she says she is "pretty" weak in English, not "really" good in math, these appearing as statements of modesty as much as of self-deprecation. The patterns for the low achieving students are strikingly different. Dee's remarks tend to be strongly negative--"I hate libraries," "I never did well on tests." Her notions of herself seem set in concrete and, in content, are not

remarks that would guarantee positive T response. Cee's remarks, too, would be likely to offend an academic. She can learn, she says, but school's not the place--"I prefer to be educated in a company [i.e., the workplace]."

It is interesting to keep these generalizations in mind when looking at the different topics, both intellectual and affective, that T and S focused on during the conferences.

Types of Topics. Table 1 illustrates the topic initiations

Insert Table 1 about here

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for both the student and the teacher. Notice that the two Asian American students initiate either significantly more or significantly fewer topics than the Caucasians. Sherry, the high achieving student who is Chinese, follows the stereotype of the quiet Asian student, initiating only 11 topics. Cee, the low achieving student who is Japanese, initiates significantly more topics than appears to be the norm. The teacher initiates approximately the same number of topics with all students except Sherry with whom she initiates fewer topics. In all cases, the teacher initiates more topics than the student, an indication of her role as director of the conversation. None of the other trends in topic initiation appear noteworthy.

Focal Topics: Intellectual. In each conference, the teacher focuses on an almost identical percent of intellectual topics with each student. However, the substance of those topics varies for both the teacher and the student. The intellectual topics were subdivided into two categories: discourse and

surface level. Table 2 illustrates the differences in

Insert Table 2 about here

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concentration across the conferences. The different types of students express their intellectual energy differently, and T expresses different intellectual foci with the different students.

As Table 2 illustrates, T initiates discourse topics most with Jay, Sherry, and Dee. Cee, the lowest achieving student, receives an equal amount of initiation of discourse and surface topics. Recent research (Freedman, 1979; Somners, 1982) indicates that discourse level concern is the most "productive" concern to have about writing. That is, discourse concerns will help most in generating successful essays. It is of note, then, that T did not focus on this type of topic with Cee.

The two Caucasian students, Jay and Dee, initiated discourse topics most themselves. Thus, there is a "match" between T and these two students. On the other hand, Sherry initiates surface concerns most, exactly the opposite of what her teacher initiates with her. Cee splits her concern, a pattern again different from the rest. Cee seems to see intellectual concerns as a flat set; she imposes no hierarchy of importance on them, a fact that could have detrimental consequences for her writing process. She is at a novice level of skill and has difficulty distinguishing what is important. She has no criteria for allocating her composing energy to some parts of the task rather than to others. At this

point in the semester, the teacher does not appear to be leading her to concentrate mostly on one area as she does with the other students.

It is interesting that during the conferences, the teacher asks whether English is the native language for both Asian-American students, an issue that never arises with the Caucasians. Both Asian-Americans evidence a certain amount of linguistic insecurity which perhaps leads to their concern with the surface level of writing.

Cross Purpose Talk. That the concern be shared between T and S, however, may be even more important than what the concern is. As we have noted, there was no match in focal topics between T and Sherry. With no match in focal concern, T and S will likely be talking at cross purposes and may not even be attending to what the other is trying to say. Freedman (1981) found that this cross-purpose talk manifests itself in a T-S conference when S and T each bring up a topic of concern over and over again, no matter what the other wants to focus on, indicating that T and S often have different agendas for what needs to be covered in the conference.

We found, in fact, that cross-purpose talk between T and all four students surfaces subtly in our data. For example, we found that students can initiate talk about their concerns by bringing up topics as if in extended response to T questions, but which really take the form of "quick answer to X, but now I want to talk about Y." [4]

T: Okay and you're not sure about some punctuation marks. Okay those are fairly technical concerns. Do you have any other..areas in your writing

like when you're sitting down to write an essay,
that you really feel,
...that are..difficult for you to do,
like does it seem difficult to organize,
does it seem difficult to develop.

Sherry: No not really.
Um..I sometimes my I guess tense,
I have to say it out loud,
and that's why I can't do it in class,
cause you don't want to...start..talking.

T wants to talk not about mechanics, but about organization and development, but Sherry brings the conversation around to her own concerns, mechanics and verb tense. Another example follows:

T: (reading Cee's essay)

See-- when you break it down like that,
you...what..what you have is
the..the first core,
/Uhhuh./
"Person is able to experience,"
prepositional phrase,
and,
another verb phrase,
"receive education,
that is directly related..clause,
and not off the beaten path."
Okay that..that you could have really...um...taken out,
because it was almost redundant of this,
particular statement there.
/uh hum/
"As it is taught in college,
where the teachers teach the student,
and..the student finds."
So..you have all those joining words,
and joining techniques,
so that yeah you never...you never stop the sentence,
and then start a new one,
because you keep having these link words,
these words that link all your ideas together.

Cee: It is true though.(laughter)
Well I it is true.
Like I took this Secretary Administration class,
and I was working at Kaiser,
as a personnel clerk,
and I noticed that,
I learned things much better..and much faster,
and..my supervisor is much more patient with me,

than the teacher,
who expected more,
and who didn't really give a darn,
if you failed or not.

T talks about sentence structure, but Cee is more concerned with the topic itself, not as a piece of writing but as an anecdote to discuss anew, to lend support to her complaints about past experiences with teachers. Cee's is an affective, rather than an intellectual concern (see next section) that she brings up over and over during the conference.

The quality of exchanges involving cross-purpose talk is clearly different from instances in which there is a match between what T and S wish to discuss.

T: Um...is there anything else,
about starting to write,
that seems really frustrating to you,
or hard or keeps you from wanting to start a paper,
aside from the thesis statement.

Jay: Um...no u--m I'm just like...like I said before,
I'm afraid,
that I'm gonna get too vague,
if I...if I'm writing a paragraph,
and I don't have any...you know to support I'm gonna start repeating myself,
saying the same..saying the same differently.
/Uh hum./
So

T: Do you d' is it would you say that's one of the things that,
a good writer would have to...to be able to do is have...choose the right ideas,
/yeah/
that are defensible,
right from the beginning,
/yeah/
before they start to write.

Jay: That's...that's choosing the right idea,
and then having a thesis statement from there.

T: Oh okay good.

In later conferences, cross-purpose talk also manifests itself when T does not listen to (acknowledge) S's topic of concern, but rather brings the discussion back around to something else. However, in these first conferences, T tends to play the role of good listener. (In later conferences, she has a clear-cut agenda of her own about the students' papers and does not have to shift topics subtly; instead, she may and usually does shift clearly and explicitly.)

Focal Topics: Affective. Just one affective focal topic, praise giving, is brought up by T, and it is distributed somewhat unevenly, with T initiating it more with the higher achieving students than with the low. Table 1 shows that T initiates praise for the two stronger students more than for the two weaker. Indeed, the percent of times the teacher initiates praise (of the total number of teacher initiated topics) is 13% and 11% for Jay and Sherry respectively and 3% and 6% for Dee and Cee respectively.

Interestingly, the amount of praise the high achieving students receive seems to reflect, in part, the substance of the affective topic that these students initiate. Both high achieving students admit their insecurity about their writing, and praise follows these admissions. It appears that these students are skilled at eliciting praise from the teacher. For example,

Jay: (On thesis statement)
I worry..sometimes,

T: If it's a good thesis statement.
/yeah/
Yeah..well that's a good worry.
I mean you're accurate,

and you're on the right track,
to be concerned,
about a thesis statement,
so that's good.

Further, the nature of the other affective focal topics initiated by S differ, deperding on S's achievement level, with high achieving students initiating teacher-pleasing comments, and low achieving students initiating potentially teacher-alienating comments. Dee discusses at length her laziness as a student. Of the 47 topics she initiates, this one is the third most frequently initiated. Understandably, these admissions do not elicit praise. For example, in response to the teacher question, "Do you like to read?" she said:

I have friends,
and my friends are really..big readers,
and they constantly recommending books,
and I just...it's laziness,
I just..I mean reading takes concentration,
whereas television viewing you just sit there,
and they do all the work.

Cee, the low achieving Asian-American, has a markedly different affective concern, how much she dislikes and distrusts teachers. She brings up this topic more than any of the other topics she initiates. The following exemplifies how she brought up her concern:

S: Well I it is true.
Like I took this Secretary Administration class,
and I was working at Kaiser as a personnel clerk,
and I noticed that,
I learned things much..better and much faster,
and..my supervisor is much more patient with me,
than the teacher,
who expected more,
and who didn't really give a darn,
if you failed or not.
T: Hum.
Have you found that to be true,
a- at State too.
In all your classes.

S: Yes,
...As a whole.
I found there is a lot of...discrimination,
going on,
at this school,
and I talked with other students,
and they..notice it too.
/hum/
Like..I was talking to this girl recently,
I believe it was about two or three days ago,
a--nd she took this Psychology class,
last semester.
She got a B out of the teacher.
But there was this other girl,
who also had the same teacher,
two s-semesters ago,
uh received a D or an F.
A--nd she found out that..if the teacher
likes you,
she'll give you a good grade.
If she doesn't like you at all,
she'll give you a bad grade.
That's why I've been feeling,
I guess depressed,
a--nd lost,
because..I sometimes...there are not many people
who..who would give you confidence,
and who would help you,
even though a teacher might say..oh I'm always there
to help you,
but when you go to them,
have this attitude..of I don't want to help
you.
That happened to my business teacher,
she always came to the classroom,
and there's um...two students she liked.
She always said hi to them,
directly.
/uhm./
and then the other students she would just ignore.

Neither low achieving student focuses on an affective issue that would indicate that she was "teacher-wise." Rather, both talk in ways by which they could easily alienate a teacher or at least not ingratiate themselves to the teacher.

Backchannel Cues

Analysis of semantic content was augmented by the finer-grained backchannel cue analysis that we did of the test

discussion segment. While the content of this segment, in which T talks to S about a test S had taken, appears similar in all the conferences, in fact the quality of one of the test episode segments contrasts sharply with the others (Table 3) when one

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Insert Table 3 about here

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considers backchannel cues.

In each conference, the test episode segment lasts just short of 7 1/2 minutes. In all segments (that is, across conferences), T covers the same issues, in the same order. In each conference T does most of the talking, with S contributing only an occasional comment. Yet Cee's conference looks unlike the others when we examine backchannel cues. Cee produces approximately three to four times as many backchannel responses as the other students, and one third of her responses come at inappropriate moments, interrupting tone (NP-VP) groups. Further, when listening to the tapes, we perceived that several of these responses were elongated, /uh--huu--h/, serving to interrupt T simply because they "dragged on." It is as if Cee wanted to be a participant in the conversation but does not know how. The following examples help illustrate what occurred.

CEE--interruptive backchannel cues

T: Um you also did well,
if we come back and look at the very beginning,
...the first two questions were asking you,
if they if you knew how to limit the topic.
Remember how we talked about /uh hum/limit in class.
And the first one was uh,
in a two page essay,
which one of these categories.
And in a 20 page essay,

which one of these categories.
And you got them both right.
Which is good,
because it indicates at least according to this test,
whatever a test /uh hum/ can indicate.
That you have a sense of how much or how little you can say.
In a given amount of space.
S: That's true.
T: So that's,
that's good.
Now this part in through here,
down throu--gh../oh that/
T: Oh that.
You remember /laughter/ the sentences.
What they want what they were essentially testing here was your organizational ability.
Um..up through number 37.
Which is right../um here/ here.
Okay.

In contrast, note the appropriate placement of Dee's backchannel cues. The teacher does not have to stop to backtrack; the conversation flows smoothly, with synchrony.

DEE--appropriate backchannel cues

T: They're testing your sense of how much you should limit..a subject.
It's better to limit a subject,
and say..a lot about it,
and go in depth,
and develop it.
Than to choose a hu--ge subject.
And say very little about...it.
/Uh hum./
Cover all this area,
and really say nothing.
/Uh hum./
Okay so that's what they were testing,
and you missed both of those.
I don't know if it's because you didn't know,
how much this was,
or if you didn't understand what they were testing or what.
But..we'll talk about that whole concept of limiting,
/uh hum/
the subject.
And pay attention to that,
cause that's not an easy sense to develop.

One has to ask whether Cee's backchannel cues reflect her

place on the achievement scale, whether they are a product of ethnic background, or whether they are simply idiosyncratic. Analysis of the language patterns of more students would be required to answer those questions. Yet it is evident that, whatever the cause, Cee's discourse strategy marks her as different from the other students, and that this strategy, taken along with the kinds of topics she focused on as revealed earlier, helps shape the quality of her conference.

Consequences to the Student

Expository Modeling

Definition. Certain segments in T's discourse stand out for their length and complexity. They appear, in fact, like mini-essays, composed orally, on the spot, and delivered to the student almost like formal lessons. We found that some of these segments met certain "expository writing criteria." The criteria are:

(1) that the piece of discourse contain a "thesis," that is, an overriding general idea that could be supported by facts, illustration, explanation, or other conventional development strategies that an essay writer would employ;

(2) that it also be developed in some way, whether by a single sentence or several sentences; and

(3) that it could "stand alone" as writing stands alone, with appropriate deixis, independent of exophoric reference (Halliday and Hasan, 1976).

xample 1 should make clear the kind of discourse that we

included in our analysis, and example 2 the kind we excluded:

(1) T speaking to Dee

There is a difference obviously between speaking and writing,
/uh hum/
There's a lot more communication that can go on in speaking.
I can move my hands
or knit my brows or do something
and you're getting a lot more information,
than my words,
/uh hum/
whereas the reader only has a piece of paper,
and the words on it.
So...a lot of people,
do tend to write the way they speak
until they suddenly..learn..principles or guidelines,
that help them,
manipulate,
this artificial..world called a piece of paper with words on it,
or an essay,
/uh hum/
however you want to call it.

(2) T speaking to Sherry

Of course the subject emphasizes,
and what you need..at least,
to join these two..complete ideas,
is a semicolon.
Hopefully,
you'll be learning other joining words,
like "but,"
and "and,"
and "or,"
"so,"
to show,
how to join,
the sentences,
and indicate,
the kind of relationships that exist between these two sentences.

In example 2, while T develops the idea of joining complete sentences with a semicolon or coordinating conjunctions, and it might be argued that she begins with a topic sentence, she depends on exophoric reference to be understood, specifically

about the identity of the sentences that T and S are discussing. The use of the demonstrative "these," occurring twice in the discourse cited, is a clue to its depending on an external context. Thus, even though it has some of the marks of expository discourse, we do not count it as expository for our purposes. In contrast, example 1 contains all the criteria: it has a topic sentence which is developed and the text is internally consistent, with reference being endophoric.

After identifying all instances of expository discourse for each of the four conferences, we considered the following:

(1) the number of times that such discourse occurred and the number of idea units within each occurrence,

(2) whether the occurrences were characterized as highly colloquial or as academic in register, [5]

(3) what motivated the discourse.

Frequency of Occurrence. Over the four conferences, expository discourse appeared as is illustrated in Table 4. At

---

Insert Table 4 about here

---

the extreme ends, the high ability Caucasian, Jay, received almost five times the number of expository discourse models from T as did the low ability Asian-American, Cee.

Looking at idea units, one gets a slightly different picture. Although idea units devoted to expository discourse for Jay outnumber those for Cee by more than four to one, thus echoing the ratio seen in the chart above, the linear progression across the four students, does not recur. The two Caucasian

students received an almost equal number of total idea units devoted to expository discourse. However, because this is accounted for by one stretch of discourse in Dee's conference that was particularly long--96 idea units, as oppcsed to the average length for the four students which was 23 idea units--the results may simply reflect an anomaly.

Occurrence of Written Language Features. We found some of these expository episodes to be more "written" or academic in register and some to be more colloquial. Example 3 illustrates what we mean. Underlined are elements that can be identified as belonging to a written rather than colloquial register:

(3) T to Jay

When we talk about pre-writing in class,
we talk about the whole process,
and that Trimble book,
talks a lot about feelings people have,
and assumptions that are...either accurate or inaccurate,
about professional writers,
people who make their living writing,
and um...maybe by reading that book,
and doing some of your own thinking,
um...and I'd like students' feed-back,
as they go through the course of the semester,
to see...what kinds of things,
you start realizing about yourself,
as a writer,
you know...what...what...does seem to block you,
what is really that fear,
and can you tackle it.
Is it just something...that's...kind of an arbitrary...fear you have,
or is it something that is really genuine,
that...where you lack a certain ability that you feel,
is necessary,
/yeah it is/
to be a professional writer.
/uh/
So hopefully,
you know by going through this class not only do you learn the techniques of expository writing,
but you'll learn something about yourself.

The written-like features include: an introductory subordinate clause, two instances of technical language, an instance of nominalization, two correlative conjunctions, and an appositional phrase. One should also note T's reference to authority, "the Trimble book," in support of her ideas that writing is a "process" whereby one discovers one's strengths and weaknesses as a writer, the overriding thesis of this stretch of discourse. These features, thesis and support from an outside authority, are, of course, characteristic of written essays.

Example 4 between T and Dee, although labelled expository since it contains "expository" features, contrasts sharply with example 3. One might argue that this expository model that Dee received is different in kind from the one Jay received:

(4) T to Dee

That's really a great start,
to come into..a..a writing class like this and have all those..different ideas,
plans and stages that you go through,
/uh hum/
you're really...I think..very far along in knowing,
the whole process,
that..that..um occurs when you have to write a paper.
Most people think that you can just sit down and do all that at once,
you can think and write and organize it,
/yeah/
yeah..and that's why most people have so much difficulty when they write.

One written-like feature is underlined here, technical language. There is a thesis--that there's an advantage to knowing that writing is a process--but the support is anecdotal, a legitimate strategy for development but close to informal conversational strategy. So while both pieces appear more "spoken" than written," containing hedges, hesitations, vagueness, and

colloquialisms, example 3 is clearly denser in written features than is 4, and fits an academic register more than a colloquial one.

While T used both colloquial and academic registers throughout the conferences, during these expository episodes, at least, she spoke in a strikingly more academic manner with Jay, Sherry, and Dee than she did with Cee, and more with Jay than with Sherry or Dee. Perhaps for the reasons we found in our semantic analysis, perhaps for other reasons, T was motivated to use, and thus to model, an academic register differentially with these students. In general, the effects of this kind of interchange for students could well be that, even indirectly through modeling, some learn how to talk to a teacher, getting practice participating in an academic register with a guiding interlocutor, while others get no such practice.

The two high achieving students seemed to know how, although unwittingly, to get T to begin her expository episodes. As in the incidents of praise-giving, T generally responded to Jay in this expository way when he expressed or implied uncertainty about writing. T seemed to want to help him see things as writing teachers do, to let him in on her own perspectives about writing:

JAY--Group editing

T: You-- as long as..and along with your classmates,
will-- see that,
/UC/
editing is very specific.
It's not just sitting back,
and saying "Gee this seems nice,
or it doesn't seem nice,"
and you don't know why,

and you start...when you're va--gue,
you almost have to,
it seems,
attack the person personally,
but if you're looking at specific things,
..every single topic sentence,
the thesis statement,
the organization,
how you decided to open up the paragraph,
introductory paragraph.
Is the development good,
in each specific paragraph.
It's very...technical really,
/yeah/
when you get down to it,
so that there isn't much room for va--gue generalities,
va--gue judgments,
/uh huh/
at least it shouldn't be.
And I think by then too,
once you see the kinds of things that other people are doing,
you...you won't be as threatened.
/Yeah/
too-- at least hopefully that's the experience you'll have.
And by then you'll be...you'll have written a lot of essays for the class,
so you'll have a pretty good sense of,
the things that are your strengths and weaknesses as a writer.
So too (UC),
so it shouldn't come as some great shocker.

Her responses to Sherry and Dee were similarly motivated (although Dee's motivating statements tended to come across as complaints rather than uncertainty--e.g. "I have a terrible vocabulary"). T was not, however, motivated to give Cee the kinds of lessons and insights that she did with the other three. Of the two expository episodes that Cee was exposed to, the first Cee requested directly: "What exactly is an idiom"--a question, incidentally, that came somewhat inappropriately after T had asked Cee whether she had any questions about class procedure. T answered Cee's question in a rambling, non-specific manner, so

while the answer is expository by definition, it is not of high quality:

T: An idiom.
Well..it's my understarding that when a teacher would mark something for idiom,
it's um--what,
a form of..usage that's known to native speakers,
like a certain preposition that we would always use before a certain word as opposed to another kind of preposition,
/uh huh/
that you really..there aren't any clear cut rules that you can..always consistently follow to know what kind of words to use,
but it's just knowing by speaking the language,
and hear how native speakers,
use certain words,
in certain places,
/uh hum/
and it may not be just prepositions.
/uh hum/
There's all different kinds of ways,
idiom,
that um...that that's something that you pick up by hearing native speakers speak the language all the time,
or reading,
things like that.
I don't think it's classified,
in other words if any particular kind of grammar error,
or any particular kind of word,
as a noun,
as opposed to a preposition,
or an adjective.
Um...it's just word usage as it's set up by a native speaker,
native speakers of the language.

The second of these episodes with Cee came as a way for T to divert an awkward situation in which Cee was complimenting T on her teaching. So this low achieving student, unlike Dee, and unlike the two high achieving students, did not get "taught" by T during the conference in the same characteristically "expository" manner. Her own contributions to the conference helped prevent these lessons from occurring.

Invitations to Return.

A sample of talk from the end of every conference proved particularly revealing in illustrating the consequences of the student-teacher interaction. This talk generally centered on the teacher's invitation to the student to return for additional individual meetings. On the whole, this teacher was exceptionally generous with her time and let her students know about her generosity. However, these four students got different tastes of this generosity. Each idea unit is numbered.

JAY T: (1) if you think of anything,
(2) do feel free to come down,
(3) ..and talk with me,
(4) ..in the office.
(5) If I go through a lesson too quickly,
(6) ..or there're points that I...didn't raise,
(7) that you really wanted,
(8) to ask about,
(9) and you didn't feel you had time in class to cover them.
(10) Always come down,
(11) ..or set up an appointment to...to meet with me.
(12) ..Uhm-- as a process class it's important,
(13) ..that you keep upwith the work.
/Yeah/
(14) Because you don't want to be thinking about thesis statements,
(15) when you're thinking about topic sentences,
(16) or topic sentences when you're thinking about paragraph development.
(17) Or-- introductions and conclusions.
(18) You know...when you can kinda tackle...each part of the writing,
(19) itself,
(20) as its own,
(21) little...what.
(22) ...As its own issue,
(23) and its own lesson.
(24) ..And you can kinda get clear,
(25) at least on the principle.
(26) It takes a while,
(27) to incorporate it into your writing.
(28) It takes practice.
(29) ..There's only so much I can teach you through,
(30) ...talking.
(31) Most of it comes from you,
(32) writing.

/Yeah/
(33) Um,
(34) but I think you'll find that,
(35) step by step,
(36) the essay will not be,
(37) a big blur,
(38) of issues that,
(39) ...you've already got a good sense of a lot of the factors and variables that go in.
(40) Hopefully this will clarify some of the techniques that you can use to accomplish those,
(41) ..those techniques,
(42) those variables,
(43) so if you have any questions,
(44) ...feel free to ask,

SHERRY T: (1) Well you know where my office is.
S: Yeah.
T: (2) And...if you...if after a class,
(3) on a thesis statement..or something,
(4) you don't understand,
(5) do come down here.
(6) I try not to let...I really like people to get...keep up with the class,
(7) since it is a what do you call process oriented class.
(8) You don't want to be thinking about thesis statements,
(9) when you're down the road looking at..how to join sentences,
(10) and develop sentences,
(11) or...you don't want to be thinking about topic sentences when we're looking at..how to develop...paragraphs.
(12) So that if for some reason a particular lesson seems very confusing,
(13) or you have other ideas that you wanted to discuss,
(14) do come down,
(16) ..and make use of this time.
S: Okay.
T: (17) Okay all right...and if you think of questions later,
(18) you'll feel free to come in.

DEE T: (1) Uhm...all right like I said,
(2) if you have any...questions,
(3) ...comments,
(4) things that you want to talk to me about,
(5) ...do come down to the office,
(6) and keep up with the course.
S: Okay.
T: (7) Uhm feel free to come down now that you know where it is,
(8) ...to visit,
S: All right.

(9) whatever.
T: Okay.
S: Is that it?
T: Yeah
..that's all
..I just essentially.....

CEE
T: I have to go to a class now.
S: Okay.
T: Uhm is there anything else you want to ask me? Any final observations?
S: Is there any extra credit work we could do?

The number of teacher idea units devoted to the invitation varies from 44 for the strongest Caucasian student to none for the weakest Asian-American. It is notable that this is the same student Cee, who admits that she feels discriminated against by her teachers. In fact, she is. But we also see why.

CONCLUSION

We have examined how the teaching-learning relationship is established between one teacher and four of her students in a college composition course. We have found that: (1) the different students wanted to focus on different types of topics (discourse level topics for the two Caucasians and surface level for the high achieving Asian-American; the lowest achieving student had no hierarchy of intellectual topics) (2) the teacher focused on different types of intellectual topics for the different students (discourse level topics for all except the lowest achieving Asian American student) (3) the teacher gave more praise to the higher achieving students who seemed to elicit that praise by expressing their insecurity about their writing, (4) the lower achieving students initiated topics likely to alienate a teacher, and (5) the synchrony of the conversation

broke down with the lowest achieving Asian-American student (who is a native speaker of English)--she inserted backchannel signals at inappropriate times in the conversation.

These differences in conversational interaction signal the possibility of differential instruction. Even in this first get-acquainted conference, we found that the teacher gave quantitatively and qualitatively different explanations to the four students, with the higher achieving students receiving more expository explanations and with their explanations being delivered in a more formal, "written-like" register. Further, the higher achieving the student, the more likely she or he was to receive a more elaborate invitation to return for future conferences.

The teacher intended to treat all of her students equally and was surprised by the results of the analysis which bring to light much of what is unconscious in a T-S interaction. By highlighting the differences in a single excellent teacher's interactions with her different students and by making explicit the students' contributions to the interaction, we can begin to practice exerting conscious control over those aspects of the teaching-learning process that are likely to be detrimental to what a student learns and can focus on those aspects that are likely to be successful. Our intent is to help teachers carry out their intents.

Footnotes

[1]This work was supported by grants to the first author from the Research Foundation of the National Council of Teachers of English, from San Francisco State University, and from the University of California at Berkeley.

[2]All except one student, a low achieving Caucasian, completed the course.

[3]It should be noted that Mehan's guideline #3, "Convergence between researchers' and participants' perspectives," can be questioned. Research in conversation strategy (Gumperz, 1982) has shown that what participants perceive is occurring in conversation can be different from what is actually occurring.

[4]Transcription conventions:

/----/	interruption by other speaker
--	elongated syllable
,	rising intonation
.	falling intonation
..	non-measurable pause
...	measurable pause

[5] Let us clarify what we mean by "written" language features. Chafe (1980, 1982) describes certain language features as being prototypically spoken or prototypically written. Nominalization ("operation," not "operate"; "management," not "manage), for example, is a prototypically written rather than spoken feature. We also designate as written, or academic, certain broad discourse strategies such as succinct thesis statement, clear supporting evidence, balanced sentences, and transitional devices such as "however." Such features will be dentified as they come up in the discussion.

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TABLE 1

TOPIC INITIATIONS

	TEACHER-INIT.			STUDENT-INIT.			
	INTEL	AFFEC	OTHER	INTEL	AFFEC	OTHER	
HIGH ACH Cauc. JAY N = 107	54% n=58	13% n=14	33% n=35	47% n=17	25% n=9	28% n=10	N = 36
As.Am SHERRY N = 74	43% n=32	11% n=8	46% n=34	64% n=7	27% n=3	9% n=1	N = 11
LOW ACH Cauc. DEE N = 120	50% n=60	3% n=4	47% n=56	62% n=29	15% n=7	23% n=11	N = 47
As.Am CEE N = 101	47.5% n=48	6% n=6	46.5% n=47	49% n=42	37% n=32	14% n=12	N = 86

TABLE 2

INTELLECTUAL FOCAL TOPICS

	TEACHER-INIT.		STUDENT-INIT.		
	DISCOURSE	SURFACE	DISCOURSE	SURFACE	
JAY	74%	26%	88%	12%	
N = 58	n=43	n=15	n=15	n=2	N = 17
SHERRY	75%	25%	29%	71%	
N = 32	n=24	n=8	n=2	n=5	N = 7
DEE	82%	18%	72%	28%	
N = 60	n=49	n=11	n=21	n=8	N = 29
CEE	56%	44%	52%	48%	
N = 48	n=27	n=21	n=22	n=20	N =42

TABLE 3

BACKCHANNEL CUES

	Length of Test Episonde Segment	# of S Backchannel Cues	# of Backchannel Cues That Interrupt Tone Groups
Jay	7 min. 20 sec.	8	0
Sherry	7 min. 20 sec.	8	0
Dee	7 min. 20 sec.	12	0
Cee	7 min. 30 sec.	30	11

TABLE 4

EXPOSITORY MODELLING

	Students			
	JAY	SHERRY	DEE	CEE
Number of incidents	9	6	4	2
Number of idea units	166	84	157	42
Range of idea units across incidents	6,34	8,21	16,96	13,29